DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 681 CS 215 841

AUTHOR Salas, Angela M.
TITLE School in Cleary's "Ramona" Books.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meetings of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (San Antonio, TX, March 26-29, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Individual Development; Popular Culture; *School Culture; *School Role; *Socialization; Student Adjustment; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Cleary (Beverly); Normalizing Transformation; *Ramona Books (Cleary)

ABSTRACT

Schools, with the assistance of parents and teachers, frequently gang up on children in the service of what they believe is a neutral, objective idea of how a child ought to behave, look, dress, learn, and be. Children, in turn, learn how to live within these supposedly neutral norms, and may grow up to enforce these same rules upon their offspring, students, and family members. In B. Cleary's "Ramona" books (1968, 1975, 1981, 1984), Ramona Quimby's trajectory from "Ramona the Pest" to "Ramona Forever" seems positive. The books tell the story of an initially willful and often unhappy child who, through frequent mishaps and firm teacherly correction, learns that pulling hair is always a bad idea, and that she cannot expect everyone to see and do everything her way. Ramona evolves into someone Roberta (her new baby sister) can safely emulate and pester, as Ramona herself pestered older sister Beezus. In short, Ramona is wised up and much happier by the end of "Ramona Forever" than she was in the earlier installments of her saga, when she was diagnosed as having "poor self-control" and a "negative desire for attention." Ramona's scholastic trials, however, can be seen less as ordinary (harmless) rites of passage than as ubiquitous (but traumatic) examples of the ways schools function to normalize and homogenize their subjects. Ramona is seen as moving from one wounding experience to another as she learns how to get by and do exactly what is expected of her with half her brain while daydreaming with the other half. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 407 681

Angela M. Salas, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
Adrian College
Adrian, MI 49221
(517) 265-5161, ext. 4318
e-mail: asalas@adrian.edu

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Salas

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

School in Cleary's Ramona Books

When I was in the first grade at Waterson-Lake Elementary School in Cleveland, Ohio, I was already aware that my parents, like Ramona Quimby's, were "economically challenged." So, when my mother loaded me onto a bus for downtown Cleveland's department stores, I was certain that we would gravitate, as usual, towards the sale items; I was also OK with that fact. We were searching for boots for me; preferably boots that would serve both as rain and as winter protection. My mother wanted boots that would fit over my school shoes, to maximize my warmth and minimize the chance that I would lose my sloafers. I was a tomboy so, unlike Ramona, who despaired when wearing Howie Kemp's outgrown brown boy's boots, I had no desire for beautiful red girl's boots.

We rode the bus, standing much of the way, clomped into Higbee's, and headed down the escalator to the children's shoe department. Their boots, as I recall, were in rows, with sale boots near the back, to be gotten to after you had walked through and been tempted by the full-price new inventory. My mother was never lured by new and flashy displays. Boots, pants, socks, dresses, underwear. The prices were all artificial, she told me. Only an idiot would pay full price.

Except for this day. For some reason I cannot understand, my mother's eyes fell upon, and were transfixed by, an expensive pair of white Winnie the Pooh boots with a

CS 215 841

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

picture of a frolicking Winnie, as well as red soles and elaborate red trim. "Aren't these nice," my normally sensible mother cooed, reverently lifting one boot down and showing it to me.

"They're Winnie the Pooh." This was a condemnation, not any sort of praise. They were also little-girlish. Why would a first-grade tomboy want to wear little girl Pooh boots? And they would be conspicuous, all white and red in Cleveland's brown slush. I might even be beaten up for wearing such obviously expensive boots through my shabby neighborhood. Ick. But they're full price, I reminded myself, Mom's can't afford to buy them for me.

Except that she did. We walked out of Higbee's with those boots and, unlike Ramona, I was not elated. Purchasing this pair of boots would complicate the paying of utility bills, would perhaps mean another meatless dinner or two, but if all I wanted, my mother said reassuringly, was a nice, white pair of Winnie the Pooh boots, I ought to have them. And now I did. White, conspicuous, Pooh boots. All because, by age six, I thought I had my mother figured out.

The next day, a school day, I put on the boots, walked up the street and, when I turned the corner, leaned against the window of the drycleaner's and pried the boots off my school shoes. Then I slogged, boots in hand, through the streets and to school. I did this for three days solid, until my teacher and my mother ganged up on me. My teacher, concerned by my wet shoes and shriveled feet, phoned my mother and insulted her by suggesting that there were charities that could provide me with boots, thus keeping me from dying of wet, cold, prunish feet. My mother, stung, retorted that she'd bought me a perfectly lovely pair of boots . . . and, of course, they caught me. Thereafter, my mother

walked me halfway to school and, when I arrived, my teacher checked to make sure I was still wearing my Winnie the Pooh boots. I looked and felt babyish -- even more so with all this surveillance -- but I had been returned to compliance with grown-up expectations and, presumably, been saved from pneumonia.

Protecting foolish me from my own mistakes seems to be a perfectly reasonable thing for grownups to have done. In fact, the telephone call from school that says "we are concerned about your child" may seem unambiguously positive -- an act of goodwill and concern from school to home. However, worrying that my bootlessness was a sign of familial pathology, calling to suggest ways my parents might comply with their obligation to boot me, and then commiserating and planning with my mother to assure that I would wear my boots is also an example of the ways in which schools serve to monitor students and their families and enforce their conformity with supposedly neutral norms of what is healthy and appropriate.

My point in sharing this memory is not to reveal a psychosis, to complain about my mother, or to belittle my first-grade teacher who, though generally humorless, was a kind person. My point, rather, is to illustrate that schools, with the assistance of parents and teachers, frequently gang up on children in the service of what they believe is a neutral, objective idea of how a child ought to behave, look, dress, learn, and be. Children, in turn, learn how to live within these supposedly neutral norms, and may grow up to enforce these same rules upon their offspring, students, or family members.

When family, colleagues, friends and acquaintances learned that I was preparing an article about school's role in socializing Ramona Quimby, their responses were almost

uniform. "Hey. Great. I always identified with Ramona. I hate what happens to her at school." Or (admiringly): "Ramona really drove those teachers crazy. I always felt sorry when she got to be more like Beezus." Teachers of all ages of students expressed solidarity with Ramona against narrow teachers and herdlike classmates, asserting that school took something away from Ramona, even as it taught her how to be a more socially acceptable person. After all, it seems obvious, if not pleasant, that a child as noisy, impulsive and pesky as Ramona must learn to curb these impulses in order to get along in the world.

Ramona as Pest, the Ramona who becomes a temporary kindergarten dropout for boinging Susan's curls, and who is perpetually misunderstood by her first grade teacher, grows into a child who, by the end of Ramona Forever, confidently welcomes her little sister into the Quimby household. On the way home from the hospital with her mother and her new-born sibling, Ramona calls herself "wonderful, blunderful me" and looks happily at Roberta Day Quimby, despite her initial assessment that a new cat to replace the old, recently dead Picky-Picky would have been a more welcome addition to the household. Based upon her own experiences, Ramona asserts that it is "hard work to be a baby" (180) and feels a rush of protective love and sympathy for Roberta; she will help her sister get by.

Ramona's trajectory from Ramona the Pest to Ramona Forever seems positive, the story of an initially willful and often unhappy child who, through frequent mishaps and firm teacherly correction, learns that pulling hair is always a bad idea, and that she cannot expect everyone to see and do everything her way. Ramona evolves into someone Roberta can safely emulate and pester, in much the same way Ramona herself pestered elder sister Beezus; unlike Beezus, Ramona has had Willa Jean Kemp to teach her patience and

understanding. Ramona will, like Beezus, be able to interpret Roberta's teacher's quirks for Mr. and Mrs. Quimby (hence putting their remarks into perspective), and will advise Roberta about how to navigate between the demands of fitting in with her classmates and doing as her teacher would prefer. In short, Ramona is wised up and much happier by the end of Ramona Forever than she ever was in the earlier installments of her saga, during which she got into trouble for helping Davy, a slow and forlorn learner, master his capitol Ds, and was diagnosed as having "poor self-control" and a "negative desire for attention." She's coming along.

I have recently begun to see Ramona's scholastic trials less as ordinary (cute and harmless) rites of passage than as ubiquitous (but traumatic) examples of the ways schools function to (using Michel Foucault's words) "normalize" and "homogenize" their subjects. When I study the Ramona books I see Ramona moving from one wounding experience to another as she learns how to get by, avoid unfavorable attention, and coexist with her teachers and principals. An extraordinarily intelligent child, Ramona learns to do exactly what is expected of her with one half of her brain and to daydream with the other half. In one episode in Ramona Quimby, Age 8 after a misunderstanding involving a raw egg and her forehead, Ramona worries that her teacher, Mrs. Whaley, disapproves of her: "[S]he was most uncomfortable because she was so anxious not to be a nuisance to her teacher. She stopped volunteering answers, and except for Sustained Silent Reading she dreaded school(110)."

Early in my graduate school career I promised myself never to apply any of Michel Foucault's theories to anything. I promised to simply read and understand allusions to what

I thought to be his fanciful, if elegant musings. I have recently, however, become more and more struck by the ways in which Foucault's observations of the carceral society in Discipline and Punish (1975) seem applicable to Ramona's life in school, where she is trained to sit still, keep her eyes on her papers, her hands to herself, to control her temper, and to believe that all these changes to her are necessary and desirable. No matter how just Ramona's cause may be (anger at having her work copied, or an attempt to help Davy, who is always lost) she is singled out, rebuked, isolated, or embarrassed for her infractions, as when she is made to apologize publicly for destroying Susan's paper bag owl, an owl the unimaginative Susan copied from Ramona. Slowly, however, Ramona internalizes the rules of her school life (ie that touching another person's work, hence "stealing" the time they put into it, is worse than their copying that work, hence "stealing" the intellectual work that went into the original), and, by third grade, she has learned to cooperate with one half of her brain and to fantasize with the other. Ramona Quimby has learned to survive in a school situation too slow and too rule-bound for her, further, she has learned so well that she doesn't even question her adaptation. It seems "natural" and positive, perhaps because the primary benefit she derives is avoiding criticism and punishment.

One might say that Ramona grows up in the course of the Ramona books, that she becomes more empathetic and kind. And yet, this is the child who noticed, better than any of her teachers, that Davy is a slow-learner. This is the child who sees, more clearly than her classmates and her teacher, that the rules of the school child (not "acting big" or copying) are clearly in conflict with the rules of school, that students be "grown up," and display this maturity for their adult monitors. She knows that teachers reserve the right to

tease and rebuke children, but woe betide the child who points out an error in the reasoning of the adult. In short, Ramona has always been empathetic and, mostly, kind.

Knowing, as she does, that being a baby and a child is hard work, Ramona is willing to help this newborn baby to overcome the obstacles which caused her so much pain and embarrassment. Cleary's narrative implies that Ramona will pre-socialize Roberta so that she will not end up on the time-out bench during the first day of kindergarten, and so that she will enter first-grade knowing how to keep her eyes and her hands to herself, no matter how interesting other things might be. In short, Ramona will, out of love and kindness, perpetuate the normalizing functions of school in order to protect her sister from the pain of not fitting in. This is a kind burden, undertaken out of empathy and a sense of responsibility, and yet is a little bit creepy. Foucault argues that power is not a top-down phenomenon; that the "manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in . . . families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole" (1978, 94), and Ramona's conversion from square peg in round hole to holder of loving sandpaper should Roberta need it, seems to vaidate this. To help Roberta, Ramona will file down her rough spots and make the work of the school that much easier; Ramona has moved from renegade to agent of the state.

Perhaps this is why there are no Roberta books. As thorough and determined a character as Ramona would no doubt have bleached out any of Roberta's renegade tendencies, making her sibling wholesome, well-behaved, and full of good intentions.

Roberta, then, would be a boring character -- safe in school, but not the stuff of repeated readings.

Works Cited

Cleary, Beverly. Ramona Forever. New York: Morrow, 1984.

---. Ramona Quimby, Age 8. New York: Morrow, 1981.

---. Ramona the Brave. New York: Morrow, 1975.

---. Ramona the Pest. New York: Morrow, 1968.

Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Vintage, 1979.

---. The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1978.